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Book review: A New Way of Belonging: Covenant Theology, China, and the Christian Reformed Church, 1921–1951, written by Kurt D. Selles

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A New Way of Belonging: Covenant Theology, China, and the Christian Reformed Church, 1921-1951. By Kurt D. Selles. Grand Rapids, MI, USA, Wm. B. Eerdmans 2011. Pp. xv + 272. \$28.00.

The volume under review provides a history of the mission to China by the Christian Reformed Church – a Dutch Calvinist diaspora denomination from the United States. This well-researched story is told by Kurt Selles, the grandson of former CRC missionaries to China and currently the director of the denomination's media ministry. As a CRC insider himself, Selles provides a detailed, objective, and critical account of the intercultural negotiations that CRC missionaries underwent when entering the tumultuous context of early-20th century China. In the midst of this narrative, Selles hopes to show that while the missionaries believed they had “many points of contact” with the Chinese (2), the main point of contact was the CRC's covenant theology and such ancillary practices like infant baptism which facilitated the communication of Christianity to a context that held a strong view of family solidarity (180). This offers, as the title claims, *A New Way of Belonging*.

This chronologically-organized volume begins by discussing how a church mainly focused on “scattered Hollanders” made the decision to establish a China mission. The rallying cry came when, much like with William Carey, students challenged CRC leadership to establish a foreign mission (14-21). When CRC missionaries finally arrived in China in 1920, they stepped foot on a soil that had been well-tilled for over a century by every major Protestant denomination from Europe and North America. The mission needed to deliberate over finding “virgin soil” and partnering with another mission – the latter of which highlights some of the foreign debates that were transplanted into the Chinese context.

Chapters 3-6 illustrate the challenges and the serendipities experienced by the young mission, in the midst of anti-foreign and anti-Christian movements, and world and civil wars. The CRC missionaries eagerly adopted the “Nevius plan” of indigenization and hired Chinese evangelists, Bible women, and colporteurs to help in the ministry. This proved to be challenging when several evangelists clashed with missionaries over salary disputes (95-106, 206-210). Additionally, Chinese evangelists' teachings on human nature and human perfectibility sounded more like the Mencian tradition of Confucianism than the Augustinian-Reformed tradition of the CRC – with no missionary rebuke; a fact which Selles attributes to the foreigners' low level of Chinese language (163-164). On the other hand, the CRC mission was careful with the education they imparted, adapting the Heidelberg Catechism with China-focused prohibitions around such practices as fortune-telling, geomancy, and ancestral worship (152-155).

The book concludes with a discussion about what happened after the foreign missionaries were repatriated to the United States in 1950. Like many other cases, the indigenous workers made the necessary adjustments to survive during the 1950s, but by the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the church was permanently closed.

Kurt Selles provides a view of *two* new ways of belonging – for the Chinese who embraced aspects of covenantal theology and for a denomination's shift beyond its narrow, North American context and into a wider vision of the church's global mission. The study could have been strengthened with comparisons highlighting how certain CRC practices and experiences differed with other missions, particularly other Reformed groups. Notwithstanding, the book is a fascinating read for specialists and those generally interested in Christianity in China, and timely considering the surge of interests in Calvinism in China today.

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